# Our Faith

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## The Modern Churchmen's Union

T. J. Wood
(Vicar, Charlbury, Oxford, England. Formerly Secretary of the M. C. U.)

The Modern Churchmen's Union stands for religious freedom within the borders of the Church of England. There have been many examples of men who, to maintain the cause of religious freedom, have found it necessary to leave the orthodox Churches, with their narrow dogmatisms, and to found Churches of their own in which they might worship God and follow Christ in liberty. The Modern Churchmen's Union was founded in 1898 by those who sought to preserve liberty of thought within the Church of England and to prevent its doors from closing upon toleration and the freedom of knowledge.

Traditional religion had to face the challenge of Biblical Criticism, and of advancing historical and scientific knowledge. Some found refuge from the problems of modern thought in obscurantism and hardening dogmatism. But the modernist faced the challenge of modern thought with a firm faith that all truth was a revelation of God and must find a welcome within the Church, if it is to be the Temple of Truth.

The aim of the modernist, therefore, is to reconcile ancient tradition with modern knowledge, and to defend the freedom of scholars in their search for, and proclamation of, truth. He has had to fight a hard battle, but his success can be judged by the Doctrinal Report, published in 1938, in which the positions for which he has striven are, in the main, conceded. But his task is not yet finished, and the Union continues its aim of presenting the Christian Faith in a form which will commend the truths of the Gospel of Christ to the men and women facing the problems and difficulties of this modern world.

The Union believes that this can best be done within the borders of an ancient Church, and it upholds the tradition of the Church of England for toleration and learning; its ideal of the Church is of a comprehensive fellowship of all who seek to follow Christ. Creeds are but symbols of the truth, and freedom of interpretation must be conceded to all. Presented with such liberty and comprehensiveness we believe the Gospel of Christ to be indeed the Good News of this New Age.

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## The Divine Initiative

Rowland Gray-Smith
(Professor of Philosophy, Emerson College, Boston)

In the Protestant theological schools of America and Europe, two conceptions of religion are at war with each other. Some think of religion as primarily man's search for God. Others, often in conscious reaction to that view, think of religion as primarily God's search for man.

How do Unitarians conceive religion? The by-laws of the American Unitarian Association contain a phrase which reads: "pure religion which, in accordance with the teachings of Jesus, is summed up in love to God and love to man."

That is a very wholesome conception of religion in its obligatory aspect. An earlier form of that by-law phrase contained a different adjective qualifying "religion." Instead of "pure" it read "practical." Which adjective is more accurate? Jesus himself used neither phrase, neither "pure religion" nor "practical religion." Such language was not in his idiom. According to the teaching of Jesus it was *man's duty to God* that was summed up in the two commandments, to love God and to love man. In our contemporary idiom, "practical religion" would certainly seem to hit that off better.

Practical religion, or obeying God's commandments, is a very significant aspect of religion. But religion as a whole is more

than its obligatory aspect. According to the teaching of Jesus religion as a whole is based primarily not upon man's love to God but upon God's love to man. And the religion which stemmed from Jesus was "good tidings of great joy to all people," a gospel of the divine initiative, or God in his love searching for man. So it could very well be said that, according to the teaching of Jesus, *pure* religion was summed up in God's love for man, and *practical* religion in man's love for God and his fellow man.

The distinction is fundamental. Is God searching for us, or are we just searching for God? Is man the lost sheep whom the Good Shepherd goes out to seek and bring back to the fold, or is man merely a lost sheep struggling to find its own way home?

The reaction against the nineteenth-century rationalistic view that religion is merely man's search for God was bound to come so long as the Bible remained in our hands, for the Bible from beginning to end represents religion as God searching for man. And Jesus himself does so most emphatically.

The distinction here drawn is not simply an academic or theoretical one. The whole tone of our spiritual life depends upon whether we regard religion as primarily our search for God or as primarily our response to the divine initiative — our love for God and man being our response to God's love for us.

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## "Rethinking the Unitarian Relationship with Protestantism"

Under this title, with the subtitle *An Examination of the Thoughts of Frederic Henry Hedge (1805-90)* the Beacon Press has published a pamphlet (42 pp., 50¢) written by George H. Williams, lecturer on church history at Harvard Divinity School. The following sentences are quotations to introduce the work to our readers.

"Universality of intention is a presupposition of any Christian community without which it can be neither truly a church nor in truth a Christian body."

"For some Unitarians, of course, our movement takes its entire character from the fact of its being a supposedly radical departure from Christian orthodoxy."

"Converts to Unitarianism are often beguiled into believing that it is the genius of our denomination to throw out all tradition including that of Unitarianism itself."

"The Church has collected a vast wisdom from generations of prayerful living. Sectarian and modernistic religion have alike too often despoiled her of her treasures."

"The true liberal can be open to the past no less than to the contemporary and the future."

"Our loyalty to the historic community of saintly men and women should be no less intense than among those Christians who stand watch over narrower gates and less accessible entries into the same Kingdom."

"We find ourselves increasingly isolated from the main army of Christendom. We no longer understand the new strategies. We have lost communication."

"Our present isolation from the main Christian forces, combined with our reiterated insistence that we are always in the vanguard, stands in marked contrast to the ecumenicity, the catholicity, the broad churchmanship of most of the leaders of Unitarianism in the formative years."

"Without a sense of relatedness to Christendom, without more than a peripheral participation in the affairs of Protestantism, striving for a new unity and a larger dimension, the would-be Christians among us will perish for want of that spiritual, sacramental, liturgical and covenantal fellowship which is the essential connective tissue of the larger body, the universal Church."

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## To Solve Our Dilemma

Roy B. Wintersteen
(Minister, First Church, Roxbury, Mass.)

Our free fellowship is faced with a dilemma. After having been puzzled by it for many years, I now find myself in this residual position:

I believe that faith in God is the taproot of our spiritual life.

I cannot take a neutral or indifferent attitude toward this faith.

I want a church that affirms faith in God.

I believe that we should welcome into our churches all who wish to come as long as they do not subvert this affirmation.

I believe that those who stop short of this affirmation cannot become leaders in a church whose basic principle is faith in God.

I believe that the present tendency to depart from the affirmation of faith in God is leading now to the disintegration of our historic Unitarian fellowship in America. This is serious. To deal with it we shall need all the wit and wisdom and spiritual grace we can summon.

## Minister Wins Award

Rev. Edward J. Manning, Unitarian minister, Gardner, Mass., has had the distinction of coming ninth in a national contest and receiving a cash award from Freedom Foundation for his sermon on "What Is a Minister?"

The *Fitchburg Sentinel* reports: "He described the clergyman as a priest who serves as an intermediary between his people and God, a prophet who maintains the universality of the moral law, and a pastor who maintains close contacts with his people and helps them to solve their problems."

In the course of his sermon Mr. Manning quoted from the address delivered at the last May meeting of the Unitarian Christian Fellowship.

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## Forgive Us Our Sins

A. R. Shelander
(Sharon, Mass.)

The greatest danger to our country is not the aggressiveness of any foreign power, but rather the spiritual and moral laxity of so many of our people. Jefferson once remarked: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just." During the year 1946 the American people spent eight and a half billion dollars for liquor, six billion on gambling, and the cost of crime was more than twenty billion. This totals nearly thirty-five billion dollars for these three items alone. During that same year the American people spent less than one and a half billion for religion and three and a half billion for education. If it were not for those who believe in God and put God's truth and right above self-interest our country would not continue to be a going concern for one single year. Arnold Toynbee says: "Modern man is doomed unless he learns to control his own nature." And he adds that this can be achieved "only through the knowledge and the love of God."

Religion is the only thing that can save the human race from self-destruction. The function of religion is to restore human beings to spiritual health and to maintain them in that health by providing nurture for their souls. Honesty and good will are the marks of spiritual health. If all human beings were honest and had good will toward one another, everyone could have security, a comfortable home, nourishing food, education, and leisure for creative effort. To regain spiritual health a person must face reality. He must spend some time each day alone with himself and God. He must stand before God exactly as he is, without any pretense. This will prove to be painful, because he will remember follies and evil deeds in his past life that he wants to forget.

The wonderful thing about it all is: "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive them, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." At family prayers the members of the family meet in the presence of God. In church a person meets his neighbors in the presence of God. "Through piety alone," said Emerson, "can nature be managed."

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## "The Common People Heard Him Gladly"

C. W. Townsend

(Reprinted from an article in the *Inquirer* by the minister of Unity Church, Torquay, England)

The creative imagination of the early Christian centuries brought into action a human God so winsome, so soul-stirring, that millions have loved him spontaneously and ardently. Both Synoptic and Johannine interpretations contributed to this astonishing end. . . . Very early the original traditions of the personality and mission of Jesus were overlaid with messianic and mystical stratification until it became practically impossible to recover the picture of the real man of Galilee and the original purport of his message. . . .

Let us call this process the Johannine religious genius of the theological right. There are lovely and gloriously incandescent elements in that creation with which Christendom cannot dispense, but there are elements in it also which we of the theological left cannot abide!

Is it possible for us to produce a collective Johannine spiritual genius of the left, so that the common people will hear us gladly?

In his own characteristic way, Richard Wright . . . achieved it with memorable success. Much later, James Martineau paid tribute to Unitarianism in his claim that it was "Christianity in its simplest and most intelligible form." What can we do in our day?

A Jewish rabbi, Solomon B. Freehof, writes, "Jesus is still the living comrade of countless lives. No Moslem ever sings 'Mohammed, lover of my soul,' nor does any Jew say of Moses, 'I need thee every hour.' The genius of Jesus is not one of doctrine nor of organization but it is distinctly one of direct influence. . . .

An American writer, Virgil Aldrich, says, "Men say they love Plato. They also say they love Jesus. But they really love what Plato said, the points he made, while they love Jesus himself; not the everlastingly important points he made but the everlastingly attractive person he was."

Perhaps it was something like this that the late Valentine Davis had in mind when he wrote, "In the new vision of universal faith it is not any Christ mysticism, but Jesus realism that is required for the right direction of thought and a clear apprehension of spiritual truth."

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## Is Tolerance An Evil?

In these days when it is commonly held that to display a large tolerance is pretty much the same thing as to be of a forgiving temper, only a refined thinker will be able to follow a speaker who is trying to show that the so-called virtue of tolerance is really a vice, and that toleration differs *toto caelo* from the forgiveness that receives an errant person back into the community.

The following quotation is from an address on *Tolerance and Forgiveness* delivered at the bicentennial celebration of the laying of the cornerstone of King's Chapel, Boston, by Sebastian de Grazia, assistant professor of social sciences at the University of Chicago.

"What is so bitter is that tolerance has brought about the deterioration of morality by parading as a good. No one has clearly realized that with each widening of the sphere of toleration a moral principle hits the dust, something that once was moral becomes a matter of 'opinion,' a thing of no truth, an affair of minor preference. Working silently and all but irresistibly, this radical immoral force reduces communal standards to a burnt-out hulk.

"Worst of all, toleration brings no good to the tolerated one. Each tolerated act, like single lumps of sugar, seems sweet to the recipient but in the aggregate such acts decay him. He soon learns that it is not only the things he wants to do that are no longer forbidden. He finds he no longer can get any moral direction. He wakes in the morning and knows not what to do with himself. Moral beliefs are not prohibitive only; their other side is direction. Our tolerated one is soon lost, he senses no direction, everything is filled with infinite possibilities. Where to turn, then? where to go? whom to follow? what to do?

"This, my friends, is real misery. It is alienation from all moral authority, from all sources of wisdom and illumination, from God himself. Remember—we were born to live in community, not in alienation.

"We border on this miserable state today. Is there any clearer example than that of our churches which in a fever of disengagement from the old morality blew too hot and then too cold? Now they must resort to the doctrine of tolerance to excuse themselves for the sorry state in which tolerance has left them. How can one be anything but tolerant, they ask, when one is not sure that one knows good from bad? This is poetic justice, indeed it is divine justice, for the reason that the churches no longer know good from bad is their long life at the shrine of tolerance; having chipped at the statue of their faith so long, they have made it unrecognizable, its features blunted, a chunk of stone. What was there left to do but to erect a new statue to the enemy himself, the patron of skepticism, St. Tolerance? In the churches there was nothing left to believe in but the process of disbelieving. The last stage is reached—the vice is embraced. Tolerance becomes the virtue. Happy and great the guilt, is it not, when tolerance from all pulpits is preached up.

"With our moral capital running out, our position steadily grows worse. Who today can say that everything seems well and best disposed. The continued application of tolerance has corrupted the morality of the community, turned the tolerator into a twilight man, and the tolerated one into a pale disbeliever. But community, tolerator, and tolerated are all one. Agent and patient meet in the community. We the community have no moral tone, and rot under the city clocks. In the presence of evil we burn our lips in silence and so will go down to the same death as the guilty. Having done nothing to turn them from wrong paths, we too are guilty."

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